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ABSTRACT

By looking at narratively-rich poems both as individual poems and as part of much broader social narratives, students become extremely excited, and their papers become far more complex in exploring gender, ethnicity, and social class. An instructor tries to help students enter into the life of the poems, to enter into a conversation the poet has begun. The ability to talk and listen to each other, to know how to tell a story and to listen to the stories of others is becoming more and more an essential part of literacy in people's daily lives. The instructor has students translate a poem literally into a text of prose so they compare their lives to the lives inside the text and embrace the life and story inside. He stresses a more process-based pedagogy instead of a more formal one, and it has become clear to him that this pedagogical practice helps students understand issues surrounding literature, literacy, and diversity. (SC)

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by Fred Arroyo

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Life Writing: Finding Whole Narratives in Poetry and Composition[1]

> [In composing our writing lives, we live within]
> "the continuation of a story that is just unfolding."
> —Walter Benjamin

Our session will generate a discussion on how diverse forms of literature have been or can be employed in examining issues of race, class, gender, and ethics within the writing class. For my part, I will explain how in looking at narratively-rich poems both as individual poems and as parts of much broader social narratives, students become extremely excited, and their papers become far more complex in exploring gender, ethnicity, and social class. Simultaneously students enhance their ability and *ethos* as writers, and they are thus more insightful about the world at large, their understandings of poems, and their compositional skills.

Whether teaching composition or creative writing, I often apply examples of life-writing-narratives and ask why, for example, poems like Gary Soto's "Oranges" and "Cruel Boys" work so well in both classes. In Critical Strategies for Academic Thinking and Writing, Malcolm Kiniry and Mike Rose use these two poems for students to compare (243-5). However, even though the questions Kiniry and Rose include are helpful in generating ideas, they only reestablish definitions of what a *poem* is, definitions which are often difficult for freshmen to understand, let alone get excited about. Therefore, I try to help students enter into the life of the poems, into reading and recomposing both poems into a single text they can begin to converse with, and, at times, they dazzle me: they enter into the text as if they are

[1] To be presented at The Conference on College Composition and Communication's 49th annual convention in Chicago, Illinois on April 1-4, 1998.

entering into the conversation Soto has begun. And it is their ability—their literate behaviors—to do this, which is so telling.

One of the most important issues we composition instructors face in this quickly approaching millennium is literacy: how do we prepare students to live in a global world where literate behaviors are needed constantly, day-to-day, moment-to-moment, second-for-second, byte-by-byte? Not to forget how important literacy will be to live in a world where racial and social differences become all the more public in our daily lives. And thus, the one thing I will try to stress is that I hope to prepare students for this new millennium through what Shirley Brice Heath calls "counsel," a concept she has gathered from Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller." One of the many extraordinary facets of Benjamin's exploration is the loss of counsel "because the communicability of experience is decreasing" (Benjamin 86). What is needed, then, is the ability to talk and listen to each other, to know how to tell our story and listen to the stories of others. Telling stories, sharing experiences, communication—all are key to counsel for according to Benjamin "counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding" (86). In other words, our stories can continue when we communicate and counsel each other: through counsel we begin to understand how we nourish our lives and generate the continuation of life through language. Heath decisively links Benjamin's counsel to literacy and literate behaviors in our every day lives. She writes:

> Being literate means being able to talk with and listen with others to interpret texts, say what they mean, link them to personal experience and with other texts, argue with them and make predictions from them, develop future scenarios, compare and evaluate related situations, and know that the practice of all these literate behaviors is practical. (298)

In entering into the texts, then, I must compose a paradigm, a situation, which allows students to step away from the poems as a form and read them as a process, or as part of Soto's life-writing-narrative. This requires that the students and I read and recompose "Oranges" and "Cruel Boys" into a single text, and that we do so with intimacy, exploration, understanding, and in a circle of language where we are listening to Soto's words for counsel and as a moment where we can provide counsel to each other. We want to continue his narrative by listening and by talking back. And students want this, they want a text to be accessible, they want to enter into the text through their own terms. Thus, part of what I do is call them into the language. *Who do they see within the text? What are their situations? What is being narrated? What is generating meaning outside the text and shaping its creation? Are there moments of tension, struggle, understanding, and recognition? Has some transition taken place, some right-of-passage?*

Often, I will have them translate the poems literally into a text of prose, or free-write on a similar time in their lives, or ask of who they are reminded of in their reading. We are not searching for answers to a list of predetermined questions, but creating "a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding." Amazingly, in seeing themselves within the text, in comparing their lives to the lives inside the text, students begin to compose the narrative they see, begin to literally embrace the life and story inside. And I want to make this clear: instead of giving students a set of problems that can be defined through formal poetic definitions (tone, persona, image, line breaks, etc.), I try to create a situation that allows students to create, connect, understand, and enter into the texts they are reading.

In choosing to provide "counsel," I had no choice but to create pedagogical practices that allowed me to read the same pieces of literature and language that nurtured my imagination and life. First, I have to enter the circle of language. Then,

I invite my students to enter into this web of life and language. However, there are broader issues concerning literature, cultural literacy, diversity and pedagogy that I am addressing. Oddly enough, I have created this specific classroom practice from the problems in a text that Mike Rose helped to devise, while also trying to help students "cross the boundaries" Rose so eloquently elucidated when he called for an education of "embrace":

> A friend of mine recently suggested that education is one culture embracing another. It's interesting to think of the very ways that metaphor plays out. Education can be a desperate, smothering embrace, an embrace that denies the needs of the other. But education can also be an encouraging, communal embrace—at its best an invitation, an opening. (225)

Once students have crossed the boundaries of what a poem *should be* into what it *can be*, there is this great opening for them. They begin to compose compositions in which they tell how Gary Soto is embarrassed about not having enough money to buy his girl a candy, but how the clerk understands his situation, if, perhaps, only because she sees something about him; how Gary identifies with Jackie the "Oki" because they both come from families that work, and how he has changed, grown older than the boy in "Oranges" and has become hardened; how Gary shows us "surface toughness," but how there is still the little boy trying to get someone to listen and understand his feelings and his life and the lives of people like Jackie; how a young Mexican American, from up near Gary, Indiana, compares his experience with his first girl friend to Gary's "Oranges," how he now sees the peer-pressure he went through, how he was labeled and proscribed to be something he wasn't, how he may have treated the girl badly, and how he now sees that we can know more about ourselves when we understand how others see us and treat us, and how we see and treat others.

Every semester we are faced with a new, complex group of students, and we must all have, hopefully, some of the same thoughts: How can I invite these students into the immense responsibilities and rich rewards that come with literacy? How many of these students will leave school and never return? How many can I help, how many will I turn away? Again, Rose faces these complex particulars—"the attempt to provide education for all members of a vast pluralistic democracy"—with intelligence and grace (238). He writes about "poverty," "class," "culture," and the "constraints" that bind our "minds" and our pedagogical practices (238). He shows us why we can't give counsel to our students, and why we can't receive counsel from them. But Rose challenges us because the story he tells about poverty is much more brutal and in need of greater address. Underlying his perceptive critique is the poverty of our imaginations and how as instructors we create situations that do not "invite a student across the boundaries of that powerful room" (238). Instead, we create situations that turn them away, that impoverish their imaginations, the experiences they can share, the stories they can tell, the literate behaviors they carry inside.

Finally, I am stressing a more process-based pedagogy instead of a more formal one because I love and cherish the "rich mix of speech and ritual and story that is America" (238). Moreover, it has become clear that the pedagogical practices I have outlined not only begin to help students understand issues surrounding literature, literacy, and diversity, but they also help to create situations, *rhetorical situations*. By inviting students into the process of reading Soto's life-writing-narrative, they begin to create an exegesis that tries to articulate his purpose, audience and, eventually, his chosen genre in delivering a message. Thus, once students have created some sense of *ethos* between the texts and themselves, they are then ready to enter deeper into their compositional and poetic insights, into their processes as writers and literate peoples trying to create a form called a

composition. We—everyone living within composition studies—still need to understand its complexity, how we can imagine new situations, and how we can invite our students to imagine themselves within them.

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